WALK A MILE IN MY BOOTS

A new FWP project helps hunters and landowners understand each other's perspective on issues related to public hunting on private land. BY SCOTT MCMILLION

SHARED PERSPECTIVE A new FWP program uses an interactive website to help public hunters and private landowners discover how much they have in common.

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Like the wind and the sky, hunting permeates Montana lifestyles. Dedicated hunters live and breathe hunting. For them, hunting season is the peak of the year. Hunting helps drive Montana's economy. It shapes our culture. It connects generations of families, helps us understand our vast natural world, and fills our freezers.

But the future of hunting in Montana depends on the continuing cooperation between landowners and hunters. In recent years, finding a place to hunt has become increasingly difficult for many hunters. Gone are the days when a hunter could jump a covey of Huns and pursue them at will, or when a hunter was surprised by a landowner who said, "Sorry, I don't allow hunting."

In Montana, as in all of North America, wildlife belongs to no single person but rather is held in trust by the state for all people—the public. But there's a hitch. Private individuals or businesses own two-thirds of Montana. And when a hunter shows up at the door in an orange vest asking to hunt, landowners have the right to say yes or no.

Unfortunately, more of them are saying no. Land ownership patterns are changing, with more property being held for private recreational use. Individuals or groups are leasing many farms and ranches for their own hunting. Some gates are closing because landowners have had bad experiences with hunters, or they've heard of somebody else's bad experience. They might be concerned that hunters will spread weeds, damage roads, or disturb livestock. Maybe they just relish their privacy. They don't have to explain.

But decreasing access may soon result in fewer people deciding to hunt, which could mean long-term problems for landowners, wildlife, and Montana's hunting traditions. Public hunting is the most effective way to control big game populations. Unmanaged herds of deer, elk, and other large wildlife can extensively damage agricultural lands and natural habitat. And populations can become so concentrated and overabundant they become vulnerable to diseases.

Hunters and landowners traditionally have much more in common than they have as differences. Both groups share a keen interest in Montana's land and wildlife, depend on a healthy and sustainable landscape, and work or hunt in the cold, heat, mud, and other features of a natural landscape.

So where does that leave hunters and landowners—Montanans who need each other but often fail to understand each other?

One step in the right direction would be for hunters and landowners to see the other's perspective, to walk a little in each other's boots. That's what a new on-line program developed by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks aims to do. Named the Hunter-Landowner Stewardship Project, the interactive website is designed to help landowners and hunters discover how much they have in common. The site presents ideas and tools each can use to identify acceptable hunter behaviors and build better relationships.

"So many of the discussions about public access end up with people throwing grenades at each other, and there is no progress," says FWP Education Program manager Thomas Baumeister, who helped design the new project. "We are trying to move things along, to give hunters who want to get past all these ideological barriers something to work on, for them to engage in." Adds Alan Charles,

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PERMISSION GRANTED The new FWP program teaches that hunting private land is a privilege, not a right.

FWP landowner-sportsman coordinator and the project's other architect: "We want to foster better understanding on both sides of the fence." That, in turn, could reduce conflicts over public access and lead to more open gates and stronger bonds between hunters and landowners.

Fun and easy to learn

Here's how the program works: Participants log onto FWP's website at fwp.mt.gov and click on the "Hunter-Landowner Stewardship Project" icon under the "For Hunters" category. They are directed to an interactive website containing information on topics such as obtaining permission, retrieving game, hunting ethically, and preventing litter and wildfire. Then there's a voluntary test, where participants take a stab at several multiple-choice and short essay questions.

Some questions have no right or wrong answer but are instead meant to encourage contemplation. "[The on-line course] makes you stop and think," says Brett Todd, a landowner, hunter, and outfitter from Big Timber. "I can't imagine anybody who completes it would not have a different mindset about their own personal hunting."

Dan Clark, a hunter from Helena, says he already knew much of the material on the website but learned a few new things. For example, he was aware that if a mortally wounded animal crosses a boundary into posted land, Montana law forbids retrieving the carcass without permission. What Clark didn't know is that hunters who find themselves in such a situation may call a game warden and ask him or her to help arrange permission to retrieve the animal.

Charles notes that hunting and agriculture have much in common, such as outdoors skills, connections with animals, and habitat protection. But as the nation becomes more urbanized, more and more hunters lack rural backgrounds that in years past helped them understand the concerns of landowners. "At the same time, farmers and ranchers may not know about easy ways they can reduce problems associated with allowing public hunting," he says. "This new project gives both hunters and landowners information they will find beneficial."

Hunters are reminded to not litter, keep their dogs from bothering landowners, and prevent the spread of weeds. The course also has tips on how they can help landowners, such as by offering to report trespassers or fires.

For Montana landowners, the website offers advice on how to handle permission seekers, manage hunter numbers, and make ranch regulations clearly understood. "It's easier for hunters to follow the rules when they know what they are," Charles says. Other tips include mowing parking areas to reduce fire danger, designating open and closed routes to reduce road damage, and marking gates that need to remain open or closed.

Those who complete the course earn a certificate, bumper sticker, and cap verifying their participation. "If you see those caps out there, you know the hunters took the time to complete the course," says Charles.

The headache season

For many hunters, fall is the highlight of the year. For landowners, hunting season can mean the annual return of old friends from town and out of state, but it can also cause headaches.

Mac White, of Two Dot, provides about 800 hunter-days of use on his sprawling central Montana ranch. "Every year, I get hundreds of people knocking on my door, wanting to hunt," White says. He tries to manage the numbers and keep people spread out, and he has rules he expects hunters to obey. For example, hunter sign-in is between 7 a.m. and 9:30 a.m.; during the rest of the day, White has a ranch to run. And starting this fall, people who want to hunt on his ranch need to show him a Stewardship Project certificate. "It's a way to filter the numbers a little bit," White says. "If they don't want to spend the time to get the certificate, they can hunt elsewhere."

Chuck Hyatt, a hunter education instructor from Circle, says that even in his isolated part of the state there is increasingly less access to private land as property changes hands. His two young sons have already completed the Hunter-Landowner Stewardship Project course, and he plans to use it in his hunter ed classes. He's hoping his students will also take the project's main messages home to their parents. "A lot of people take it for granted, but it's a privilege to go out there and hunt on private land," Hyatt says. "We need to open the lines of communication, and this program sends a message that hunters are trying."

Hunter Landowner
STEWARDSHIP PROJECT

Scott McMillion, of Livingston, is a freelance writer and a senior editor for Montana Quarterly.

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OUTDOORS PORTRAIT

Brown trout

Salmo trutti

By Tom Dickson

It's hard enough being a hunter this time of year, what with archery, backcountry deer and elk, pronghorn, waterfowl, and upland bird seasons opening one after another. But now is also when big browns become especially aggressive and wildly attack streamers. Hard as it might be, especially for my sad-eyed springer spaniel, I sometimes forego hunting a few days each fall to cast Woolly Buggers at surly browns lurking along riverbanks.

ORIGINS

Unlike native bull, cutthroat, and redband trout, browns first arrived in the West during the late 1800s as part of federal stocking programs. The fish were imported from Germany and Scotland's Loch Leven. (Some old-timers still refer to them as German browns or Loch Leven browns.) Brown trout were stocked in waters of Yellowstone National Park, from which they migrated north along the Yellowstone River into Montana. State fisheries managers later began aggressive stocking efforts in other rivers and lakes. Montana stopped stocking most rivers in the early 1970s after learning that the trout were naturally self-sustaining.

RANGE

Brown trout live in central and southwestern Montana in valley streams and rivers such as the Madison and Big Hole as well as in many reservoirs and lakes. They usually coexist with rainbow trout. Because browns can survive in warmer, murkier water, they are often more abundant than rainbows farther downstream, such as below Saint Xavier on the Bighorn.

MATING SEASON

Unlike spring-spawning cutthroats and rainbows, browns—along with bull trout and brookies—spawn in fall. During spawning season, the male's lower jaw develops a hook at the tip, called a kype, which fits into a groove that forms in the upper jaw. Biologists think males use their kype as a weapon to fight off rival males; it may also attract females, like a bull elk's antlers or a sage-grouse's fanned tail.

IDENTIFICATION

A brown trout has an olive back, and the fish's golden sides, often described as buttery colored, are covered with black and red spots, often with pale halos.

"INTELLIGENCE"

Any angler knows that browns are harder to catch than other trout species. But are they smarter? According to trout biology guru Robert J. Behnke, the brown's brain is no larger or otherwise different from those of other trout. He speculates that the answer lies in the brown trout's aversion to light and adaptation to murkier water. "The retina…is better adapted to optimally function in dim light," he wrote in a 1986 column in *Trout* magazine. "Thus, browns are more oriented to dense cover and shaded areas such as deep undercut banks, and more prone to nocturnal feeding."

That's not to say browns can't be caught at noon on sunny days out in the open. But in such conditions it's more likely that a rainbow or cutthroat trout will take your fly than a brown.

SIZE

Once browns reach 14 inches or so, they begin eating fish as well as aquatic insects. This protein boost allows them to reach large sizes in many rivers. For instance, the trout silhouettes lining the wall of Dan Bailey's Fly Shop in Livingston attest to the massive browns caught on the Yellowstone. It's rare for trout to live long enough to top 10 pounds. They usually die of old age after four or five years, though a few can survive ten years or more. Brown trout grow larger in lakes than in rivers. Montana's state record is a 29-pounder caught in Wade Lake in 1966.

CONSERVATION

Though they have displaced native cutthroat trout and arctic grayling in some waters, brown trout are extremely popular with anglers. The best way to conserve brown trout is by ensuring the fish have adequate stream flows, cool water, silt-free spawning gravel, and abundant habitat such as pools, riffles, and overhead cover.

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.